

Neighborhood councils investment in future

NEARLY two years ago, the voters of Los Angeles approved a new City Charter that contained a vision for a new kind of citizen participation through the creation of neighborhood councils. Today, the city is poised to dim that vision.

Even though neighborhood councils present the ideal opportunity for city residents and local government to work together to shape city policy, this opportunity continues to float off everyone's radar screen.

The recent submission of the mayor's budget proposal for fiscal year 2001-2002 presents an opportunity for promoting the success of neighborhood councils and the vision of empowering local residents through increased civic and political participation; further investing in tomorrow's communities today.

In the mayor's budget proposal, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) was allocated approximately \$3.7 million to continue the development of the citywide system of neighborhood councils. As this process enters one of its most vital stages, that of educating and reaching out to com-

LOCAL VIEW

By Arturo Vargas

munities that have historically had low rates of civic participation, it is crucial that neighborhood councils be allocated the resources necessary to be effective advisory groups.

If the city of Los Angeles intends to empower disenfranchised communities through the vision of neighborhood councils, then we must invest in that vision.

The current budget allots funds for DONE's salaries, expenses, equipment, and interdepartmental charges; however, there is no specific funding allotted for what will be fundamental to the success of this effort: outreach.

Once "The Plan for a Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils" is adopted June 15, DONE must implement nontraditional methods for conducting its outreach efforts in communities where there are low rates of civic participation if this initiative is

to succeed.

Outreach efforts must include an extension of the collaboration between DONE and community-based organizations under the pending Request for Qualification (RFQ) for Pre-Certification and Post-Certification, Outreach, Organizing and Training.

Community-based organizations are the most viable vehicle for DONE to conduct its outreach efforts given their experience in communities and ongoing relationships with their constituents.

The mayor's budget proposal also includes \$1.5 million for a neighborhood council grant program. Certified neighborhood councils may apply for a grant to do special projects and/or hire community-based staffing.

While the grant program is important to the long-term productivity of neighborhood councils, the bottom line is that not enough communities will be prepared for certification during the first year.

Given this possibility, it is important to invest additional funds in outreach efforts to prepare more communities for certification.

The most meaningful use of neigh-

borhood councils is to have them work in communities where there has been little civic participation.

Funding to continue the work supported under the current RFQ must be awarded for fiscal year 2001-2002. Furthermore, a portion of the funds allotted to the grant program should be held over for the fiscal year 2002-2003, at which point a larger pool of neighborhood councils will be eligible to receive those funds.

Implementing these recommendations will level the playing field for neighborhood councils throughout the city of Los Angeles. Our leadership in the city of Los Angeles has the moral authority to make neighborhood councils a top priority.

We must all collaborate to ensure that the vision of empowering local residents through neighborhood councils is fully achieved. The city's budget for the next fiscal year is the best, and perhaps only, opportunity to make this a reality.

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